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COMMENTARY

The English national curriculum assessment system: a commentary from Northern Ireland

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The five papers in this collection consider a range of important issues in relation to the English national curriculum assessment system (NCA). In responding to these articles, I wish to consider some of the issues the authors have raised generally in relation to a revised English NCA, but also more specifically I will consider then from a Northern Ireland perspective in relation to a new revised curriculum and assessment programme that is being rolled out into schools since September 2007.

Prior to the implementation of this new revised curriculum, children in Northern Ireland experienced a local version of the English NCA. This version, the Northern Ireland Common Curriculum (NICC), had a number of elements that reflected, and were parallel to, the English NCA. These included a curriculum structured into four key stages,¹ core and foundation subjects assessed against eight levels of achievement and tests for 14-year-olds (end of key stage 3) in English, maths and science. These tests were developed by English test development agencies and results from the tests were, for the first few years, reported in performance tables published by the Department of Education (DENI). However, there were a number of ways in which the NICC differed from the English NCA, which focused on local issues and which reflected aspects of the difference and diversity in community life that pertain to the NI context.² These differences were emphasised through: (1) a cross-curricular theme of Education for Mutual Understanding and Cultural Heritage to foster interaction and better understanding between children of the two main communities; (2) a core syllabus for religious education set by the four main churches within NI and (3) a common programme of study for history designed specifically to address the nature of NI society. Furthermore, the NICC had teacher assessment as the main mechanism for the evaluation of attainment at the end of key stage 1 and key stage 2. This was supported through the use of assessment units which were level-based to help teachers confirm their own judgements at the end of the key stage. Unlike England, NI did not have standardised tests at the end of key stage 2. This was mainly because NI still retains selection at 11+ and so pupils in the November of their last year of key stage 2 (10–11-year-olds) sit a high-stakes transfer test if they wish to be considered for a place in a grammar school. This test, while commonly

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referred to as 'the 11-plus test', is quite different in kind from the old verbal reasoning tests devised for such purposes. The NI 11+ test is curriculum linked and is explicitly based on knowledge aspects of the English, maths and science key stage 2 curriculum. However, this test continues to dominate the education of children in Primary 6 and 7 (9–11-year-olds) to such an extent that it overshadows end of key stage 2 teacher assessment and has a significant and substantial influence on the educational experience of pupils at the end of primary schooling (Gardner and Cowan 2005).³

The new revised curriculum and assessment arrangements,⁴ referred to as the Northern Ireland Curriculum (NIC) have emerged out of the perceived limitations of the old NICC. Many of these parallel those of the English NCA as outlined by Whetton (2009, this issue): the burden of too much curriculum content; the dominance of standardised assessment; lack of support for teachers' professional judgements in relation to children's attainments and the irrelevance of the curriculum and assessment system to children growing up in a modern, post-conflict society (Harland et al. 2002). Policy makers in NI have been able, through the devolved government arrangements, to reject those short-comings of both the English NCA (as discussed in this edition) and the NICC, and to implement a new revised curriculum and assessment system that attempts to promote many of the key factors seen as fundamental to improving the English NCA as identified by authors in this issue. Thus, as of September 2007, CCEA⁵ are implementing a curriculum and assessment system with the following main aspects: a reduced curriculum content (a statutory minimum requirement), the removal of key stage 3 tests at 14 years, a focus on skills (as delineated by the thinking skills and personal capabilities framework and cross-curricular skills of communication, using mathematics and using ICT) that will prepare children and young people for life and work; and strong encouragement to integrate principles of 'Assessment for Learning' (AfL) into teachers' assessment practice (Whetton 2009, this issue; Stobart 2009, this issue; Green and Oates 2009, this issue; ARG 2006; Black and William 1998; Black et al. 2003; Clarke 2005). Pupils' attainments will be reported on an annual basis through the Annual Report and while teacher assessment will be the main basis for the evaluation of pupils' attainments this will also be supported through computer-based ability tests of the core skills identified above, especially for primary school children.

Thus the new NIC system for 5–14-year-olds has been greatly influenced by the wide-scale dissemination of research that advocates the use of formative assessment to specifically raise overall levels of student achievement (CERI, 2005; Wiliam et al. 2004). CCEA are promoting these claims for formative assessment through the principles of AfL and teachers, while not statutorily bound, are being persuaded through official CCEA documentation, in-service training and the inspection frameworks to use generic AfL strategies. Thus teachers are encouraged to use the following key actions: 'sharing learning intentions; sharing and negotiating success criteria; giving feedback to pupils; effective questioning; opportunities for pupils to assess and evaluate their own and others' work (self-assessment and peer assessment)' (CCEA, 2007, 2). For the reporting of children's achievements, a set of seven levels of progression have been devised, with associated criteria, which attempt to articulate student progression within and across the core skills (communication, using maths and using ICT) throughout the key stages.

While the research outlined above persuasively argues for the efficacy and importance of such formative assessment practices to greatly improve student

learning and achievement, we have yet to establish how such practices impact on, and contribute to, the long-term achievements of children. Moreover, whether whole-scale changes to the use of formative assessment practice yield the learning gains attributed to it is still a moot point. I have argued elsewhere (Elwood 2006) that the use of practices such as AfL to erase the short comings of large scale national assessment systems are not unproblematic nor do they act in similar ways for *all* children and teachers in *all* classes and *all* contexts. Much of the research tends to ignore the lack of a sound theoretical framework to explain learning gains through the promotion and use of AfL, the social dynamic of assessment activity and the interaction of assessment with factors that are part of teachers' and children's lived experiences are seen as unproblematic. A further issue is the lack of focus on the shifting social relations within classrooms that results from this form of assessment and the impact of this on children's learning: *if one is advocating a change of assessment regime at classroom, school and national levels to focus more on formative assessment, then consideration must be given to the changed teacher–student relationship necessary for success in this assessment practice and what the implications of this change will mean for fair assessment* (Elwood 2006, 227–8).

When considering the changes to national curriculum assessment that NI are implementing, or those proposed here in these papers for a revised English NCA, or the new assessment and reporting proposals being considered by the English government (DCSF 2008), we can no longer ignore the social/contextual aspects of classroom life and the social interactions of teachers and students in these classrooms. If we do so, then we will fail to understand the impact of formative assessment practice in its fullest sense. Many of the authors of the papers in this edition acknowledge that the alternative assessments proposed will have associated limitations (e.g. Whetton 2009, this issue; Wyse and Torrance 2009, this issue; Green and Oates 2009, this issue) and this is to be welcomed. All national assessment systems, whether they include standardised tests, assessment for learning, national sampling programmes, single level tests, etc. will have significant social consequences for children; the monitoring of children's learning for any purpose is not neutral in any sense. Keeping to the fore a sensitivity that any assessment regime will have different implications for different groups of pupils may enable us to bring about the improvements to children's learning we wish to make by stepping away from the negative consequences of one assessment system and embracing the benefits of another.

Notes

1. Key stage 1 (KS1) [five–seven-year-olds]; key stage 2 (KS2) [8–11-year-olds]; key stage 3 (KS3) [12–14-year-olds] and key stage 4 (KS4) [15–16-year-olds].
2. Northern Ireland has had a long history of community and religious conflict between the two main (Protestant and Catholic) communities. This is reflected in the schooling system, which is formally segregated by religion as well as ability (with grammar schools) and sex (i.e. a significant number of single-sex schools). The 1998 Belfast Agreement initiated the current peace process which has led to a devolved government from the UK (Westminster) Parliament and which enables NI to have self-government in many aspects of local life, one of which is education policy and practice.
3. At time of writing (November 2008), there is still uncertainty (i.e. political impasse) around the continued use of an 11+ test for school transfer and whether post-primary schools in NI can continue to select children by ability from 2009 onwards.
4. Education Order (January 2007); Education (Minimum Content) Order (Northern Ireland) 2007, The Education (Assessment Arrangements) (Foundation to key stage 3)

- Order (Northern Ireland) 2007 (S.R. 2007, No. 45) Education (Pupil Records and Reporting) (Transitional) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007 (S.R. 2007, No. 43).
5. The Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) – the curriculum and assessment body for NI.

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